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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000551

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SUBJECT: SAUDI MFA OFFICIAL ON ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT, IRAQ  
NEIGHBORS' CONFERENCE, AND IRAN

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission David Rundell for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) MFA Deputy Director for Arab Affairs Talal Al Maliki told PolOff on March 13 that he is not convinced that the recent public statements of the Israelis that they are ready to "treat seriously" the 2002 Saudi proposed Arab Peace Initiative carry any weight. He claimed that the Israelis typically make such statements of support, but never take concrete steps to back them up. Al Maliki added that the ongoing Israeli/Palestinian conflict is the fundamental reason behind tensions in the region. He suggested that most regional conflicts would "fall into place" once this issue has been resolved. Al Maliki decried the Israelis' "poor treatment" of the Palestinians, stating bluntly that Israel's relationship with Palestine is the primary concern of its Arab neighbors.

¶2. (C) Al Maliki continued that he expects the Arab-Israeli conflict to take center stage during the March 28-29 Arab League Summit in Riyadh, but does not think there will be any major developments as a result of the discussions. Al Maliki said that other key agenda items are likely to include the Iraq crisis, Somalia, and Sudan. While he does not anticipate any significant statements or actions resulting from these discussions either, he did intimate that observers should expect as a result of Summit discussions some substantive movement and solidarity regarding Lebanon -- although he did not specify what that would entail.

¶3. (C) Al Maliki further speculated that the Summit would expand on earlier efforts to address organizational issues and the Arab League's ability to effectively carry out its mandate. He brushed off criticisms that the Arab League is not an effective forum, noting changes such as the elimination of the consensus requirement for decision, saying reforms such as this have helped to keep the forum relevant and current. He agreed, however, that it is critical for the Arab League to continue adjusting to global changes in order to effectively address regional issues. He added that Saudi Arabia and Egypt are the "big players" in the Arab League, but acknowledged that Egypt's influence has waned in recent years.

¶4. (C) Al Maliki briefly discussed the March 10 Iraq Expanded Neighbors' Conference, stating that what little information he had was based on rumor or press reports. (NOTE: At one

point, Al Maliki asked PolOff if it was true that the Syrian delegation walked out of the Conference prior to its conclusion. END NOTE.) Al Maliki was not optimistic that the Conference would do anything to ameliorate the violence in Iraq, pointing out that the killing had only increased following President Bush's announcement of his new strategy. However, he lauded the Conference as a positive step, emphasizing that the U.S. must engage with Iran and Syria for there to be any solution to the conflict. He further stated that the Iranians would never "do something for nothing," advising that the USG must offer Iran concessions in some form if it hopes to convince Iran to refrain from interfering in Iraq's internal affairs.

¶5. (C) Although Al Maliki agreed that Saudis are concerned about Iranian influence in the region -- especially regarding its nuclear aspirations -- he was somewhat dismissive about the extent to which the Iranians are actually a threat to the region. He pointed out that any country's possession of nuclear weapons capability should be condemned -- including Israel's.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Al Maliki was extremely measured in his response to PolOff's questions and said little that was surprising. However, his take on the Iranian threat was interesting in that it very much echoed what we often hear from both the general public and many of our mid-level contacts. These interlocutors tend to point to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict as the "crux of the problems" in the Middle East, while expressing surprisingly little concern about Iranian efforts to obtain nuclear weapons capability or Iranian interference in the region. Given his position as the second highest ranking official in the MFA's Arab Affairs

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Department, one would expect Al Maliki's analysis of the Iranian threat -- as well as his take on Israel's recent public comments on the Arab Peace Initiative -- to be much more closely aligned with that of the SAG's senior leadership. While this certainly supports the view that the SAG is much more progressive than the population as a whole, it also highlights how greatly centralized authority and decision-making in the Kingdom remains. END COMMENT.  
OBERWETTER